

New Jersey (Cunningham articles, 1948)

LET'S EXPLORE---

## The Sourland Mountain Area



Typical of old landmarks in Sourland area is this old swing-bridge at Griggstown, over the abandoned Delaware and Raritan Canal, once a waterway from New Brunswick to the Delaware.

BY JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

SOME say you can pick up a handful of earth in the Sourland Mountains and smell how the mountains got their name. Others claim the mountain range spreading through the edges of Somerset, Hunterdon and Mercer counties took its name from a since-forgotten early settler whose name was reasonably close to "Sorrel." Mountain residents shortened the name to "So'rl" and, finally, "Sour."

Most logical—and most widely accepted—theory is that the mountains were named Sourland because of the massive rock formations which spread across the range top and have always made farming impossible. Colonists found no such difficulties in the valleys, though, and the slopes which drop from the Sourlands on all sides form farms which are as rich-looking and as well-tended as any in the state.

There is enough of the brooding quiet of the mountain and enough of

the beauty of the valley to satisfy anyone on a Sunday drive away from heavy traffic, but it is well to know of the rock formations high up in the mountains. Two generations ago the rocks were a "must"; many a family album shows the youthful counterpart of grandma and grandpa perched atop a rock at "Devil's Half Acre," "Roaring Rocks," "Fort Hans" or "Hart's Cave." Sweethearts of long ago chiseled their emotions in solid rock, impervious to the weather.

These enormous boulders—some of them higher than a man and weighing ton upon ton—are a paradox in a country where scenic sights have become a dime a dozen and usually a quarter a look. Anywhere else paved highways would extend to the boulders and picnic tables would spread over the land. In the Sourlands, however, the stones are returning innocently to their native state: Lanes which at the turn of the century took hundreds of sight-seers to the mountain top are now completely overgrown or blocked off by the small

estates of "city" folks who have come into the mountains seeking peace and quiet.

GOOD roads lead all the way around the Sourlands from Somerville or Trenton and the road from Wertsville to Hopewell, through the heart of the hills, has both ends macadamized. It will "soon" be finished all the way over, although the short stretch of dirt and stone road between the macadam is easily traveled. Other narrow mountain-top roads are less recommended, although in good weather all of them are useable.

South of the Somerville traffic circle, a right turn at the first traffic light quickly changes the driving tempo from the whirling highways to the cool quiet of the country. Gently rolling hills are the backdrop for meadowland and small farms. The Raritan River is crossed on a 51-year-old metal bridge at a spot where the river spreads suddenly to form a

slowly eddying broad pool. Gnarled trees springing from the banks complete the picture of aged peacefulness.

Left turns at the next two intersections continue the rural mood until the road circles through spreading fields and once again crosses the Raritan where it splits about an island. A sign announces Hillsborough Township—"A farm and home community"—and over the bridge is South Branch, where the cornerstone of the old Reformed Church reveals the village was known as "Branchville" when the church was built in 1850.

Villagers proudly tell how South Branch gave to the world Anna Case, one of the brightest singing stars in Metropolitan Opera history. Many can remember her practicing on the organ with one finger when she was only 2 years old, singing "Little Annie Rooney" when she was less than 3 and joining with her parents on Summer nights in intimate family songfests. Many recall her sitting atop a barrel in her father's black-

(Continued on Following Page)



## History and Legend Plentiful in Region Famous for Massive Rock Formations and Well-Kept Farmlands



Picturesque scene in the "land of windmills" beyond South Branch. In addition to utility use, mills lend artistic touch to the landscape.



Canvas subject is this view of Raritan River where it is first crossed. Here, the tree-lined river broadens into a wide pool.

(Continued from Preceding Page)

smith shop, singing or sketching, and usually both. She still often returns to the village.

ACROSS the street from the church is an old brick house, built by Peter D. Vroome in 1792, still in perfect condition and now used by three families. One of the ladies in the house can produce "South Branch Memories," written in 1914, still an adequate description of the tempo of the village:

"No police, no jail, no court room,  
Where strife and contention  
cease;

Almost as the maker made it,  
A hallowed place of peace."

About the only time quiet didn't reign in the valley was when Diamond Jim Brady came to establish an elaborate—and noisy—home, but Jim left and his former gay house has now fallen into quiet disrepair.

Beyond serene South Branch lies the land of the windmills, serving both to pump water and to supply the final neat picturesque touch to a land already heavily endowed. Soon the Sourlands come into view as the road bears left for Flagtown. You can take your pick of stories about how Flagtown got its name: Most likely is that it was named after Jacob Flagg, who settled in the area in 1700. That doesn't compare, however, with the local belief that the practice of "flagging" the train to Somerville brought the name.

The great Belle Mead Quartermaster Depot, comprising 887 acres and having a total storage area of more than 7,500,000 square feet, is south of Flagstone. Much of the D-Day invasion equipment was sent from this depot and it still supplies troops overseas. Roadside signs even as far away as Flagtown tell of the vastness of the government property.

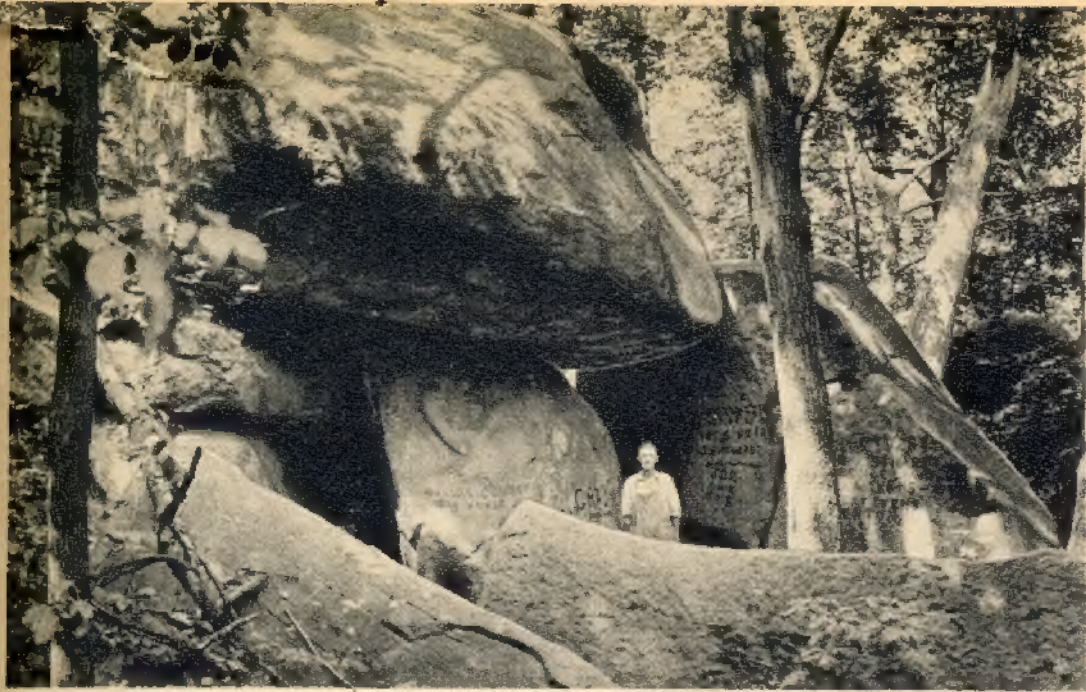
BEYOND Flagtown the road curves sharply left to a "stop" intersection where a right turn is made for Neshanic. The Sourland Mountains loom off to the left but give no evidence of either height or "sour" land. The vegetation spreading over the mountainsides is green and thick, almost to the point of being lush. In the well-kept valley farms are prosperous and every home shows the unstinting use of white paint. Modern barns dot the area but the houses almost without exception are old: Builders of "vets' specials" have not yet invaded the Sourlands.

The road down the valley on the north side of the Sourlands was first an Indian trail; later it became the Old York road. It leads first through Neshanic, centered on a quickly rising and descending hill, atop of which is the Neshanic Reformed Church, organized in 1752. The present stone building, one of the oldest in the state, was started in 1759 and finished in 1772. Its sparkling white tower is a landmark.

Southward from Neshanic (as the crow flies—and usually only he and aviators now see it) is "Devil's Half Acre." Here huge boulders, most of them weighing many tons, are piled over more than four acres. Even Satan had his troubles in the Sourlands, if you can believe the legends. It is said that he was hustling along the ridge one day with his apron loaded with rocks when he tripped and fell, spreading the boulders the length and breadth of the range.

IF the Devil story doesn't suit, maybe more believable is the geological theory that the glacier scraped the boulders from the earth as it slid downward from the North and then left the rocks behind when it re-





**ABOVE:** Unique rock formation on Sourland Mountain known as "Fort Hans," where a colonist reputedly hid in fear of British.

**BELOW:** Neshanic Reformed Church, one of oldest in state, at Sourlands crossroads. The stone edifice dates back to 1759.



treated. Geologists often visit the rock formation seeking clues to the glacial period.

Beyond the Devil's Half Acre is the cave of "Hans Van Pelt," called in Joseph Hunt Miller's poem "an honest low Dutchman," who was so frightened by the British in New Brunswick that he fled non-stop to the "hills of Neshanic." Hans hid long in a cave in the mountain and the legend says he may be living there yet. Whether or not he still haunts the region, the rocks remain piled high to form a natural cave.

Past Neshanic the route proceeds through the old village of Reaville, whose First Presbyterian Church has roots back to 1738. The present building was built in 1883. All the way to Larison's Corner the road crosses and recrosses streams. Striking is the

symphony in color the valley offers: six or eight shades of green, ranging from the yellow green of the grains to the darkness of the evergreens, blend over the landscape. Only the whiteness of the farmhouses and the redness of the barns break the accent on green.

Larison's Corner was once an important stagecoach stop on the Old York road. Ruins of a tavern lie beneath spreading vines on the right. To the left is a wooden church built in 1817 and the corner cemetery is marked by a monument to the memory of Johann Peter Rockefeller, who came to this country from Germany in about 1723. The donor of the monument was John D. Rockefeller, who identified himself as "a direct descendant."



Rock formation known as "The Three Brothers" which can be seen on road atop Sourland Mountain between Wertsville and Hopewell. Probably deposited eons ago by glacier action, boulders are on a small scale of what once could be seen at "Devil's Half Acre."



House in South Branch built by Peter D. Vroome in 1792 and continuously occupied since.

**A** LEFT turn at the church on the dirt and stone road avoids touching Route 202. A half mile beyond, a macadam road is again contacted and a left turn is made. Then, at the corner marked by a red barn on the right and an unused tennis court on the left, a right turn starts the trip upward. This is the "northern" paved stretch of the someday-to-be macadam road over the mountain.

Evidences of the work of the glacier remain in huge boulders nestling among the trees on either side of the road. One of the most unique can be seen from the road as it begins to dip down to Hopewell. On the right in a private yard are "The Three Brothers." Three boulders, from four to six feet long, are balanced on a greater boulder about 16 feet in diameter. This is on a small scale of what once could be seen at "Devil's Half Acre."

Hopewell hides beneath trees, and its slow-paced streets have completely recovered from the hectic days of the Lindbergh case. The quickest way to learn about Hopewell, after driving up and down past the old houses which line the main streets, is to visit the excellent Hopewell Museum. Open every day from 2:30 until 5:30 P. M. (with an open tea on Thursdays), the museum is presided over by the Misses Eleanor and Susan Weart, direct descendants of the Stout family—the original settlers of the Sourlands. Either can tell the story in full.

The Hopewell story really began at Sandy Hook in 1620. There, Penelope Van Princes and her husband were attacked by Indians soon after they landed in this country from Amsterdam. The husband was killed and Penelope, scalped, was left for dead. She survived her wound, married Richard Stout, raised a family and

returned to Monmouth County. In 1686 her sons, Jonathan, James and David, met friendly Indians and went to visit them in the Sourlands. Twenty years later Jonathan bought land near what is now Hopewell and soon after David bought land on the northern slope of the mountain.

**T**HERE is ample reason to believe Hopewell and Amwell both can trace their names back to England, but the version the Weart sisters tell and the tale popularly believed concerns Jonathan and David, who met on daily morning rides. Neither was loquacious, apparently, because the reported conversations invariably went:

**Jonathan:** I hope you're well.  
**Hope you're well.**

**David:** I am well. I am well.

Obviously onlookers called them "Hopewell" Jonathan and "Amwell" David, and thus were their villages named. Who could prefer the English derivation?

Hopewell's red brick Old School Baptist Meeting House (as differentiated from "new school" or "new beliefs") sprang from the first split in the unanimity of the valley. As the area grew, plans were made in 1715 to build a church. A meeting at Col. Joseph Stout's house discussed whether to build it near the Stout home or in the valley, and the valley voters won after the parson warned Joseph "a loud voice cannot make up for lack of numbers!" The colonel made a double pledge—that he would build a house "five feet larger in every direction" than the church and that he would never set foot inside the new church. He kept both.

The Meeting House was used as a hospital during the Revolution and many Revolutionary soldiers are buried behind it. In the cemetery is a granite monument erected in 1865 to

(Continued on Following Page)





## LET'S EXPLORE--The Sourlands

(Continued from Preceding Page)

the memory of John Hart, a signer of the Declaration of Independence who during the Revolution was hunted for three years by the British and lived often alone in the mountains. Also in the cemetery is the old "Speaking Block," where John Houghton is said to have stood and implored volunteers to follow him to Lexington after he brought news of the start of the Revolution.

ONE of the most vital yet least known of Washington's councils of war was held in Hopewell before the Battle of Monmouth. Washington and 12 generals met in the Joseph Stout House to determine whether an effort should be made to head off the British in Monmouth County. They debated through the hot day of June 24, 1778, before deciding to attack, with only Gen. Lee dissenting. The army, encamped in the valley for two days, moved directly across the state in a march which historians describe as incredibly hot. East of Hopewell,

near Blawenburg, the army paused at a roadside well and drank it dry. At least that's what the sign says at the side of the old-fashioned well sweep.

Beyond Blawenburg Route 31 is joined for a left turn. Then, a short distance beyond, turn right after crossing Beden's Brook for a drive up along the Millstone Creek. On the far side of the creek are the banks of the abandoned Delaware & Raritan Canal, once a waterway from New Brunswick to the Delaware. At several spots along the canal remains of old locks can be seen.

Along the Millstone Creek are numerous small settlements and historic homes. One of the most interesting is in Millstone, at the former Van Doren house (where Washington slept in the "northwest corner of the parlor"). In marked contrast to the age of the lower valley is Manville, where busy factories and research buildings show the town's progress. Past Manville, at a junction with Route 28, a right turn is made, followed by a left turn to Route 29.

Explorer's map for tri-county tour taking in the Sourlands with good roads leading the way around from Somerville or Trenton.



"Washington's Well" near Blawenburg. Neagy sign says Colonial troops drank the well dry on a hot day in June, 1778, while on a forced march across the state to meet the British at Monmouth.